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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 002109

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/CACEN

E.O. 12958; N/A

TAGS: [KPAO](#) [PGOV](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: RFE/RL BROADCASTS DISRUPTED IN ARMENIA

REF: YEREVAN 1994

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SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) broadcasts were periodically inaudible for three days in Armenia beginning on November 27, the day of the country's constitutional referendum. Armenia's state-run Public Radio claimed in a statement that the disruptions were due to technical problems, perhaps with a new transmitter. RFE/RL's Armenian Service Director, Hrach Melkumyan, believes that the RFE/RL's problems were politically motivated and were timed to ensure that broadcasts particularly critical of the disputed referendum results were inaudible. RFE/RL's Armenian Service technical specialist Andranik Poghosian stated that, in his opinion, Public Radio caused the disruptions by turning off its transmitter. RFE/RL plans to send an official letter of complaint to Public Radio. END SUMMARY.

RFE/RL IS SILENCED ON THREE CONSECUTIVE DAYS

2. (SBU) According to Hrach Melkumyan, RFE/RL's Armenian Service Director, the majority of RFE/RL's evening broadcast was inaudible throughout the country on November 27, the day of Armenia's constitutional referendum. Melkumyan stated that, except for the first ten minutes, which focused on international news, and the last five minutes, only static could be heard during the program, which was one of RFE/RL's three daily broadcasts in Armenia. Melkumyan noted that the following morning, the beginning of RFE/RL's program when members of the governing coalition were interviewed was broadcast without disruption. When the reporter began to interview opposition members Paruir Hayrikian of the Self-Determination Union and Aram G. Sargsyan of the Democratic Party, however, the broadcast became inaudible in Yerevan. Melkumyan also said that on the evening of November 28, RFE/RL's broadcast was back on the air in Yerevan but could not be heard in Vanadzor, Armenia's third-largest city. He mentioned that on the evening of November 29, as an opposition rally was underway in Yerevan, RFE/RL's broadcast was again inaudible throughout the country. According to Melkumyan, the programs scheduled to be broadcast on these three days featured news critical of the results of the constitutional referendum, including reports of a sharp contrast between official voter turnout and the largely empty polling stations in Yerevan and nearby regions.

PUBLIC RADIO CITES TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES...

3. (SBU) On November 27, when RFE/RL first realized that its 7:00 p.m. broadcast was inaudible, Director Hrach Melkumyan called state-run Public Radio. Alexander Harutiunian, the Head of the Public TV and Radio Board, responded that he would look into the matter. Later in the evening, Mr. Harutiunian informed RFE/RL that the disruption was due to technical problems and denied any political motives. In a statement posted on its website the following morning, Public Radio repeated this claim, stating that it recently installed a new FM transmitter and that "it could be the reason for technical disorders." The statement says that "disturbances occurred also during 'Radiolur' informational-analytical program of Public Radio of Armenia." Public Radio told the U.S. Embassy that "Radiolur" experienced broadcasting difficulties on November 27 and 29.

...WHILE RFE/RL CLAIMS POLITICAL MOTIVATIONS

4. (SBU) Hrach Melkumyan told the Embassy that he believes RFE/RL's disruptions were politically motivated and were

timed to ensure that broadcasts particularly critical of the referendum results could not be heard. Both Hrach Melkumyan and Harry Tamrazian, RFE/RL's Prague-based Armenian Service Director, noted that RFE/RL has repeatedly experienced problems during national votes. The two directors also stated that Alexander Harutiunian periodically called RFE/RL expressing his disapproval of certain broadcasts and attempting to influence reports. Melkumyan noted that Harutiunian had stated on several occasions that he monitored the content of RFE/RL broadcasts.

RFE/RL EXPERT BELIEVES TRANSMITTER WAS TURNED OFF

15. (SBU) RFE/RL's Armenian Service technical specialist Andranik Poghosian stated that he believed Public Radio caused the disruption in the broadcasts by turning off its transmitter. Poghosian ruled out the possibility that Public Radio broadcast a jamming signal, saying that this would be too expensive and too complicated to carry out in Armenia. He also stated that the radio relay system was working throughout the three days and thus was not the source of the problem. Poghosian noted that the transmitter that Public Radio blamed was installed three months ago and that RFE/RL did not experience any transmission difficulties during these three months until November 27, the day of Armenia's constitutional referendum.

THE NEXT STEPS

16. (SBU) Harry Tamrazian told the Embassy that RFE/RL's Prague-based management division would send an official letter of complaint to Armenian Public Radio. The Ambassador will support RFE/RL's attempts to ensure the uninterrupted broadcast of its programs by emphasizing U.S. support for freedom of speech at a lunch on December 6 with newspaper editors and television directors, including Alexander Harutiunian. We will also raise the issue of RFE/RL's ability to broadcast with appropriate GOAM officials.

EVANS